TL 4059

News from Asia Watch

June 1, 1989

Human Rights in Indonesia and East Timor: President Suharto's Visit to the US

When Vice President Dan Quayle visited Indonesia last month, he met with three leading human rights activists in a significant acknowledgement of severe human rights problems in that country. He then turned around and effusively praised President Suharto, saying his economic programs could be considered "in the category of human rights." The praise negated the earlier gesture and was reminiscent of the famous toast of then Vice President Bush to former Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos's "adherence to democratic principles and the democratic process."

As a recent Asia Watch report, *Human Rights in Indonesia and East Timor,* notes, proponents of democratic reform in Indonesia believe the tendency of US officials to remain silent on human rights in their country is misguided. One dissident remarked in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1987, "the least you can do is not praise the Indonesian government so loudly and so often."

Indonesia is a friendly nation with a foreign policy that is essentially in harmony with US interests. Its economic achievements are impressive. But President Suharto is a dictator who has systematically suppressed political and civil rights since coming to power more than 20 years ago. His visits to New York and Washington beginning June 8 provide another opportunity for US officials and members of Congress to encourage him to address some of the human rights issues outlined below.

Political Prisoners

The Suharto government has jailed hundreds of men and women under a broad and vaguely-worded anti-subversion law. Many of them have been arrested for non-violent activities such as criticizing government policies; possessing or distributing banned books or tapes; or questioning the tenets of Indonesia's state ideology, *Pancasila.*

Among the prisoners are a few moderate opposition leaders including General Hartono Rekso Dharsono, former Indonesian ambassador to Thailand and former Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. After a violent clash in Jakarta's port area of Tanjung Priok in September 1984 in which troops opened fire on Muslim protesters, Dharsono joined several other influential public figures in criticizing the government's handling of the incident and calling for an independent investigation. On the spurious charge that he had incited violence, he was arrested and eventually sentenced to ten years in prison, reduced to seven on appeal.

Other prisoners include members of Islamic study groups whom the government has accused, often on the basis of very weak or non-existent evidence, of working to establish an Islamic state. Many devout Muslims are unhappy with government attempts to force organizations to formally adopt *Pancasila,* rather than Islam, as their ideological foundation, and to recognize Islam as one religion among equals instead of the only true faith. Criticism of these policies has led to mass arrests in Java, Sulawesi, Sumatra and elsewhere. Some 45 people were arrested in March 1989 on the small eastern island of Sumbawa.

Among the political prisoners in Indonesia are a small number of Muslim activists who have engaged in violence. But when armed violence takes place, many people are arrested who have only the most tenuous links to the perpetrators. With verdicts often determined before a trial begins, such people are found guilty and sentenced to lengthy terms in prison.

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Another group of political prisoners consists of about 100 men and women accused of having had links to the now-banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) which the Suharto government holds responsible for a coup attempt in 1965. These prisoners, all convicted after unfair trials, are now elderly. They include many people who almost certainly had no prior knowledge of the coup attempt and were arrested solely because they held official positions in the PKI -- then legal -- or its mass affiliates at the time. They also include a small number of people sentenced to death after having been convicted of direct complicity in the incident. Members of this group are gradually being executed, more than two decades after the event.

In some cases, people appear to have been arrested because they challenged a particular government official or decision. Some religious teachers were arrested in Madura in 1988, reportedly in retaliation for charges of corruption they had made against a local official of the Education and Culture Ministry. At least one of them was said to have been severely tortured in a regional army post in Malang, East Java, where the group was sent for interrogation.

Suspected members of separatist or independence movements in Irian Jaya and East Timor are also in prison. In some cases, they are charged with non-violent actions such as flag-raising. Some 33 people are believed detained following a flag-raising attempt in Jayapura, Irian Jaya, on December 14, 1988. Members of these groups are often detained again and again for relatively short periods without charge or trial in military camps.

It is virtually impossible for political detainees to receive a fair trial in Indonesia. Use of interrogation statements extracted under torture or other forms of pressure, intimidation of witnesses, restricted ability of defendants to consult with their lawyers, manufactured evidence and lack of an independent judiciary are some of the factors rendering political trials unfair.

Torture

Torture of both criminal and political suspects appears to be widespread. It most frequently occurs immediately after arrest while the suspect is under interrogation by police or military intelligence personnel and occasionally results in death. While a few highly publicized cases of torture of suspected criminals have resulted in disciplinary or legal action being taken against the torturer, Asia Watch is not aware of any such action where the victim was suspected of subversion or where the alleged torturer was from military intelligence. Torture and other forms of mistreatment are usually used to extract "confessions." A Muslim prisoner named Bambang Supriyanto alleged in 1988 that when he was arrested by military security agents and detained in their Jakarta headquarters, he received electric shocks on the kneecaps and shoulder blades. His toes were put under the legs of a chair which the interrogator then sat on. And he said he was kept in a darkened room for a month. The allegations are not unusual.

Asia Watch has been particularly concerned for the physical safety of people held, often incommunicado, in district or subdistrict military headquarters before they are turned over to judicial authorities. Torture has been reported from these posts in West, East and Central Java, Irian Jaya, and East Timor.

Political Killings

The Indonesian army has been notoriously disrespectful of human life since the army-supported massacres of 1966-67 which resulted in the death of an estimated half million suspected supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Military offensives in East Timor between 1975 and 1984 killed tens of thousands, with many more dying as a result of starvation and war-related causes. An anti-crime campaign, which President Suharto acknowledges in his autobiography was government-directed, led to more than 4,000 suspected criminals being summarily shot by military death squads between 1983 and 1985 without charge or trial. President Suharto says corpses were deliberately left on the street as "shock therapy."

When military troops are called in to quell riots, they often use force that is disproportionate to the threat they face, resulting in unnecessarily high casualties. In early February 1989 in Lampung, a province in south Sumatra, more than 100 civilians are believed to have died when troops stormed a religious school where an officer had been held hostage and was later killed. The official death toll was 27; Indonesian human rights organizations said the toll was far higher and called for an independent investigation into the incident. No such investigation has ever been conducted in Indonesia.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is severely circumscribed in Indonesia with strict controls on the press, frequent censorship of foreign newspapers and periodicals (particularly those which discuss corruption in Suharto's family), limitations on visas of foreign correspondents based in Jakarta, bans on books perceived as critical of the government or smacking of Marxist teaching, and a total prohibition on the use of the Chinese language in print.

In April 1989 the trial began in Yogyakarta, Central Java of two young men accused of distributing or possessing books by Indonesia's greatest writer, novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer who last year won the American chapter of PEN's "Freedom to Write" Award. *The Glass House*, Pramoedya's most recent book and the fourth in a series of historical novels, was banned on June 8, 1988. The next day, Bambang Subono, a university student, was arrested in Yogyakarta for selling copies of the book and two weeks later, a university employee named Isti Nugroho was arrested for possessing other books of Pramoedya's and for holding discussion meetings without a permit. Both are believed to have been severely mistreated; they were held in military custody until their trial began.

Ethnic Discrimination

Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia who constitute about 2 percent of the population but wield disproportionate economic influence, face sharp discrimination in education and employment. A campaign to have thousands of stateless Chinese register for naturalization as Indonesian citizens ended in September 1988. The Indonesian government has reportedly built a resettlement center on the eastern island of Sumba to house the thousands who failed to register. Asia Watch has not been able to determine whether anyone has in fact been sent there since the September deadline passed. At least one Chinese man, Tjoe A. Djin, has been in continuous detention since 1956 in a 3m x 4m cell in an immigration detention center in Kalideres, West Java. In 1986 when an article about him appeared in the Indonesian newspaper *Kompas*, he was 84 years-old.

In April 1989, Indonesian authorities cancelled a performance of a Chinese opera by a Taiwanese theatrical group on the grounds that it would have disrupted the efforts to blend in the Chinese with the rest of the population.

Violations of Political Rights

Indonesian citizens do not have the right to freely participate in public affairs or to freely change their government. The three political parties are tightly controlled and their leaders carefully selected through a combination of intimidation and inducement from the men surrounding President Suharto. Election outcomes are a foregone conclusion with the official government party, GOLKAR, assured of victory in the quinquennial elections to Indonesia's parliament. Civil service employees and even those in the private sector can lose their jobs by not voting for GOLKAR. President Suharto is also elected unanimously every five years by the 1000-member People's Consultative Assembly. Participation in the formal political system is closed off to anyone in fundamental disagreement with government policies.

Disappearances in East Timor

The Indonesian Government still has failed to account for the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of East Timorese who "disappeared" after being taken into custody by the Indonesian military between 1975 and 1984. Of the cases submitted to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Government has clarified only 16. All 16 people were found to be alive, either in prison or in their own villages. The Government has provided no information on those cases where the victim is believed to have been killed.

Access by International Human Rights Organizations

No human rights organization has ever received official permission to conduct a fact-finding mission or attend a political trial in Indonesia or East Timor.

Recommendations for US Officials Meeting President Suharto

Asia Watch recommends that US officials should do the following:

1. raise specific cases of political prisoners with President Suharto and urge that "prisoners of conscience" be released.

2. seek assurances that independent human rights organizations be allowed to visit Indonesia and establish the procedures for obtaining permission.

3. stress the importance of independent commissions of inquiry into incidents involving many casualties where government troops are alleged to have made excessive use of force. The recent clash in Lampung, South Sumatra is one example.

4. seek clarification on the position of stateless Chinese in Indonesia and assurances that they will not face deprivation of basic civil rights for failing to register for naturalization.

5. express concern about restrictions on freedom of expression and in particular, the banning of books by Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

6. urge the Indonesian Government to set up an independent commission similar to CONADEP, the commission established by the Argentine government to investigate disappearances which occurred during that country's "dirty war."

7. inquire as to how allegations of torture of political suspects (those accused of subversion) could best be followed up.

8. make clear the commitment of the United States to the process of democratization and political reform in Indonesia.

News from Asia Watch is a publication of Asia Watch, an independent organization that monitors and promotes human rights in Asia. The Chairman is Jack Greenberg. The Vice Chairpersons are Matthew Nimetz and Nadine Strossen. The Executive Director is Sidney Jones. Asia Watch is part of Human Rights Watch which is also comprised of Americas Watch, Helsinki Watch and Africa Watch.